

Health and Digital Literacy: Essential Tools for Ethiopians During COVID-19

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ABSTRACT

The impact of Covid-19 has been felt across all facets of society since it was declared a global pandemic. Countries have been dealing with infections and deaths associated with SARS-CoV-2 as well as an information pandemic due to the avalanche of information associated with the crisis. Health literacy and digital health literacy have been at the center of the pandemic, and in the Ethiopian case, there is evidence of inadequate knowledge regarding Covid-19 control practices and prevention.

Keywords: COVID-19; Health literacy; Digital health; Control practices; Prevention; Ethiopia

Dear Editor,

Since Covid-19 was declared a global pandemic, its impact has been felt across every facet of society and posed significant challenges for national and supranational entities. It has not just been the infections and deaths associated with SARS-CoV-2 countries have been dealing with but also the nature of the pandemic in generating an avalanche of information.^[1] In the context of public health emergencies like Covid-19, up-to-date health information is a necessity for facilitating the prevention, management of the disease, and protection of the community from the socioeconomic impacts.^[2] With the dissemination of large amounts of messages regarding the pandemic, the avalanche of information, if not properly addressed, would threaten healthy decision-making as well as generating uncertainty among the public. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), countries have faced both a virus pandemic as well as an infodemic as there has been a widespread of vast amounts of true and untrue information, especially through social media.^[3]

WHO defines “health literacy” as the individual features and societal resources the public and individuals require to obtain, recognize, and evaluate information and services for them to make appropriate health decisions.^[4] Meanwhile, “digital health literacy (DHL)” is the use of information and communication technology (ICT) to support health and health care.^[5] These two concepts have been important during the pandemic because the deluge of misinformation has created confusion and panic, thereby requiring policy makers and healthcare providers to provide information that is reliable, accessible, and understandable. Within the pandemic situation, people faced

a complex information environment where they needed to access, navigate, understand, utilize, and critically evaluate knowledge and services as part of supporting their healthy and protective behaviors.

Several studies have examined health literacy and digital health literacy during the Covid-19 pandemic in Africa and the relationship between seeking and using information on the coronavirus disease. For instance, an institutional-based cross-sectional study conducted from December 2020 to February 2021 among 423 physicians at a government health facility in Addis Ababa using a structured administrative questionnaire measured digital health literacy and information-seeking behavior.^[6] The research was conducted in the context of a limited access to health information among health professionals in Ethiopia due to scarce resource infrastructure. From the results, 332 (81.8%) of the participants accessed ICT technologies like computers, laptops, or smartphones for their work, 282 (69.5%) had internet access in their hospitals, 62.3% visited the medical field on the internet, and 64% searched for health information on the Internet. As for their information-seeking preferences and topics, the physicians preferred Ministry of Health (MoH) or other internal health-related websites while health blogs were the lowest sources of information. More than 66.5% of the physician searches also related to topics about the spread of Covid-19. The findings also revealed 53.8% of the participants had high digital health literacy, although 35.4% found it difficult or very difficult to find exact information. This study is relevant because accessing and disseminating healthcare information in resource-limited settings has been difficult during the pandemic, and health information-sharing is crucial for providing medical care services and controlling and preventing the disease.

A similar institutional-based cross-sectional survey study was conducted from April 4 to May 4, 2021, targeting 476 healthcare providers working at Covid-19 treatment centers in the Amhara region of Ethiopia to assess their digital health literacy.^[7] The five measures assessed were digital health literacy to share Covid-19 related knowledge, perceived easiness, perceived usefulness, computer skill, and attitude toward digital health. A total of 456 questionnaires were completed and the findings indicated 230 (50.4%) participants were at a high level in digital literacy to sharing information related to Covid-19. The factors associated with DHL were computer training, internet access, educational status, perceived ease of use, attitude, motivation, and perceived usefulness. Since approximately half of the respondents had DHL to share Covid-19 related information, this proportion was inadequate meaning more efforts are needed to enhance healthcare providers' abilities to harness ICT to help prevent and control the pandemic.

Further research has been conducted to evaluate the health literacy among high-risk groups of the community in Ethiopia, such as the cross-sectional in-person survey targeting 6007 participants from 14 April to 30 April 2020.^[8] The study was done in an environment where Ethiopia showed commitment to prevent and slow down the pandemic, with case identification, contact tracing, isolation and mandatory quarantine, and large-scale screening in high-risk groups taken as the measures to control the disease spread. The research aimed to assess the health literacy among high-risk groups in Addis Ababa regarding their knowledge, practices, and associated factors towards Covid-19 prevention. From the findings, only 11% of the participants with a history of Covid-19 related illness had contacted the free call centers and hotlines established to create awareness, receive information, and other Covid-19 related issues. As for their knowledge on transmission, prevention, and practice for preventing

Covid-19, 87% mentioned direct contact with confirmed patients, 71% mentioned breathing as a potential transmission mechanism, 85% had knowledge about handwashing and 83% mentioned social distancing as prevention mechanisms. The results also demonstrated the participants' low level of knowledge on transmission modes, prevention methods, and practice of Covid-19 prevention, with 52% having good knowledge on transmission, 60% having good knowledge on prevention, and 49% having poor practices of the precautionary measures. Hence, filling this knowledge gap is necessary to improve prevention practices and control of the spread of Covid-19.

The link between health literacy and risk perception has also been important during the pandemic as it contributes to the practices for prevention and control of the Covid-19 spread. In a cross-sectional study between April 8 and June 15, 2021 at Bahir Dar city public hospitals in Northwest Ethiopia, 423 participants with chronic illness were involved as part of assessing information-seeking about Covid-19.^[9] The measures included were perceived susceptibility, perceived severity, self-efficacy, health literacy towards Covid-19, smoker, and information-seeking. As per the findings, 44% of the study participants had sought Covid-19 related information purposively/intentionally. Misinformation about the disease and repeated messages, low educational status, negative perception of neighbors, families, and religious leaders, and awareness were the major barriers to Covid-19 information seeking. Perceived risk to Covid was an important factor associated with seeking information, which meant that the low health literacy and DHL reported in Ethiopia was an issue regarding seeking knowledge about the pandemic and its prevention and control.

Since Ethiopia adopted a risk communication and community engagement (RCCE) approach to the Covid-19 response, health literacy and digital health literacy are important pillars related to informing and educating the public to encourage control and prevention measures of the pandemic.^[10] Populations face an avalanche of information where they are constantly exposed to different versions of Covid-19 risk communications and promotional messages on social media platforms, community-based educational activities, and electronic and print media. Accordingly, enhancing public health literacy and DHL is a crucial part of the strategy to control and manage the Covid-19 pandemic spread as the world still looks for a final way out of the health crisis.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

C.R.W and G.C.L prepared and edited the manuscript. All authors have read and agreed to the final version of the manuscript.

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Not Applicable

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors confirm and declare that the research was conducted without any commercial or financial relations that could be construed as potential conflict of interest.

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